

African Heritage/Black History Month

The history of African Americans represents an important part of our country's heritage. Every February, we honor their legacy during Black History Month, and focus national attention to African Americans' many contributions in the fields of education, science, culture and economics. Moreover, we acknowledge a visionary African American leader, Booker T. Washington, as a founder of one of the most significant public health movements in American history.

A National Movement Against the Disparity

"I have learned that success is to be measured not so much by the position that one has reached in life as by the obstacles which he has overcome while trying to succeed. Out of the hard and unusual struggle through which he is compelled to pass, he gets a strength, a confidence, that one misses whose pathway is comparatively smooth by reason of birth and race."

Booker T. Washington

Booker Taliaferro Washington (April 5, 1856 – November 15, 1915) fought for equality and opportunity, rising from slavery to a position of power and influence. A realist and a man of action, he became one of the most important African-American leaders of his time. He was committed to improving the lives of African-Americans after the Civil War. He advocated economic independence through self-help, hard work, and a practical education. It was evident to him that economic independence was critical, if African Americans were to develop and prosper as other groups. Education was fundamental to begin the creation of a solid economic foundation, and self-help was its cornerstone.

In 1914, Booker T. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute, viewed the poor health status of black Americans and wrote extensively about major differences in health care and life expectancy between whites and African Americans as obstacles to economic progress. He began a project to combat the disparity "to conserve the health in order to preserve the future of the race."^{1, 2} He initiated a national movement that became known as *Health Improvement Week*; this later evolved into the *National Negro Health Week (NNHW)*, observed annually for 35 years. This initiative inspired broad support and encouragement from civic clubs, work places, businesses, hospitals, churches and minority health professionals. From 1921 to 1953, the U.S. Public Health Service supported *NNHW*.

The structure and activities involved in this movement have become the foundation for current national public health campaigns; its historical antecedents demonstrate how best to build community capacity for health promotion and disease prevention. Many health professionals are unaware of this history and other important contributions African Americans have made to medicine and public health.

The issue of health disparities between majority and minority populations is not new; it is rooted in history, poverty and culture. Health disparities represent a complex societal problem absent of simple solutions. Research and data clearly demonstrate that health differences exist among racial and ethnic minority groups. There are gaps in health outcomes and disparities in the incidence of chronic disease. The health professions also suffer disparities showing significant underrepresentation of racial and ethnic groups within its ranks across the nation. In its mission to protect the health of all communities, the public health system must acknowledge and address these racial and ethnic health disparities and target their elimination.

Booker T. Washington's legacy as the nation's foremost black educator and as one of the most influential black men of the early 20th century continues. Among his many published works are his autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, *The Future of the American Negro*, *Tuskegee and Its People*, *Life of Frederick Douglass*, *The Story of the Negro*, and *My Larger Education*. His autobiography, *Up from Slavery*, published in 1901, was a bestseller. He was also the first African-American invited to the White House, which led to a scandal for the incumbent president, Theodore Roosevelt.³

He was awarded honorary degrees from Harvard University and Dartmouth College. Posthumous memorials include the following: on the centennial of his birth, the house where he was born in Hardy, Virginia was designated a U.S. National Monument on April 5, 1956; the Booker T. Washington Memorial Half Dollar was the first coin honoring an African-American that was issued by the U.S. Mint from 1946 to 1951; and he became the first African American to be featured on a U.S. postage stamp on April 7, 1940.³

Related Links:

Booker T. Washington National Monument

<http://www.nps.gov/bowa/home.htm>

The Booker T. Washington Papers Online

<http://www.historycooperative.org/btw/info.html>

Sources:

1. *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Volumes 13, August 1914, University of Illinois Press, pages 121-122.
2. *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, Volumes 13, August 1915, University of Illinois Press, page 347.
3. *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, sixth edition, Columbia University Press.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Booker_T._Washington

For more information about health disparities in California:

www.dhs.ca.gov/director/omh/html/publicat.htm